

WRITING ACROSS COMMUNITIES AND THE WRITING CENTER AS CULTURAL ECOTONE: LANGUAGE DIVERSITY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND GRADUATE STUDENT LEADERSHIP

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The writing center as metaphorical construct and institutional space represents a cultural ecotone, a site that environmentalist Florence Krall describes as the “edges where differences come together” (4). The ecotone as a biological transition zone constitutes a locus of tremendous diversity and transformation. Extending the metaphor to social spaces, Krall argues, “Cultural ecotones are the pluralistic contexts out of which conflict and change emerge.” My own understanding of the role of writing centers and WAC in the 21st century university poignantly aligns with Krall’s notion of the ecotone and remains grounded in a cultural rhetorical ecology approach to the teaching of writing. The Writing Across Communities model represents a response to the transcultural, translingual, transnational, and transgenre universe in which our students write and live. For the past two decades, my colleague Juan Guerra and I have been re-visioning educational writing practice as ecotones of difference privileging ethnolinguistically-diverse writers (Kells, 2012, 2013; Guerra, 2015). This concept has informed my work with graduate students as they begin navigating their futures.

At the University of New Mexico (UNM), I have been mentoring graduate students for more than twelve years toward becoming future Writing Center directors, WPAs, and WAC directors, cultivating them in the cultural rhetorical ecologies of language through Writing Across Communities theory and practice. Taking a holistic ethno-ecological approach, Writing Across Communities foregrounds language diversity in literacy education that extends writing beyond strictly academic spheres. Traditional WAC models that privilege English (SAE) academic writing ultimately fail to engage the linguistic resources of ethnolinguistic writers and unwittingly disregard the discursive alacrity necessary for students to become citizen-scholars writing across academic, civic, and professional spheres. Writing Across Communities, in turn, promotes rhetorical resilience as a principal goal in serving diverse writers migrating across academic, public, and professional contexts. After a visit to meet with Tiffany Rousculp at the Salt Lake City

Community Writing Center in April 2008, my graduate students and I took on the bold challenge of launching a community writing center as a local project here in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Rousculp xxiii). In this article, I offer a brief description of the evolutionary process of developing a Writing Across Communities model for WAC and Writing Centers at the University of New Mexico through graduate student education and leadership.

Reinventing WAC: Diversity and Graduate Student Leadership

I’d like to trace the ten-year trajectory of the Writing Across Communities initiative at UNM to map the role of graduate students as the stewards of the story, keeping the conversation alive, robust, relevant, and growing. I served as the founder and program chair for the Writing Across Communities initiative at UNM from 2004 to 2014. The adoption of ethnolinguistic diversity pedagogical principles across subfields of Composition Studies such as Second Language Writing and WAC has become largely institutionalized since the first introduction of Writing Across Communities into the national conversation in 2004 (Zawacki and Cox). My colleague Steve Benz assumed the role of faculty advisor for the WAC Alliance in Spring 2014 when I went on sabbatical to complete a new book project on civil rights rhetoric. As UNM’s WAC and Writing Center programs continue to evolve and our graduate students move into tenure-stream positions across the nation, the vision of Writing Across Communities still serves as a powerful palimpsest and remains inscribed in cultures of writing both in and beyond our institution (Rose and Paine). Even though our WPA and WAC leadership continues to change, the valuing of ethnolinguistic diversity in literacy education across the curriculum remains indelibly etched at UNM (Writing Across Communities Workshop).

As William Condon and Carol Rutz argue, sustained WAC programs must be both visible and valued within their institutional homes (372). We have maintained visibility and value by keeping our

programs open and accessible and consistently present in the institutional fabric of the university and the larger community. My graduate students and I have been employing research processes alongside invention strategies to support the evolution of Writing Across Communities using inductive, pragmatic, and empirical methods. Our model of program invention has relied on both qualitative and quantitative methods including ethnographic protocols, focus groups, random sampling methods, questionnaires, and oral interviews.

The scope of graduate students' part in the evolution of Writing Across Communities has grown through self-defined roles as junior WAC leaders-in-training. These leadership opportunities stem from our prioritizing of access and equity and have afforded our graduate students a broad range of experiences in which they experiment with the various genres of the academic knowledge-making system such as drafting project proposals, designing the WAC newsletter, conducting IRB supported research agendas, generating grant writing programs in support of student-managed projects, designing pedagogical materials for their own ENGL 101 and 102 classrooms, and reporting their findings to stakeholders and sponsors. Our WAC graduate student leaders exercise authorship over their own intellectual projects in the classroom, which evolve over time into conference papers, articles, proposals, and reports. The graduate seminar in this kind of learn-by-doing context provides the space for engaging a kind of intellectual co-op, a commonwealth of ideas and visions informed by current scholarship in the fields of Second Language Writing, WAC, Community Literacy, and Writing Center pedagogies that students themselves craft together toward shared-governance leadership strategies. Equally important, the seminar provides a safe space for cultivating a culture of collaboration and critique among graduate students as colleagues.

In turn, our WAC graduate students learn to build partnerships across the institution, vertically and horizontally, presenting their findings and project outcomes in such venues as the Civil Rights Symposia (2007, 2008), Celebration of Student Writing (2009–2011), Core Curriculum Task Force Student Open Forum (Spring 2010), Working With Writers Colloquium (2011), Writing the World Symposium (Spring 2012). Additionally, our graduate students learn to exercise authority over their own chartered student organization, the WAC Alliance, electing their own leaders, establishing their own constitution and bylaws, and collaborating with other Graduate and Professional Student Organizations across campus. They manage the Writing Communities website and

the UNM WAC newsletter, *Writing Communities*. These projects are completely student generated, extending beyond the classroom space as a site of invention into self-defined opportunities for leadership and authorship.

The interconnected role of the graduate seminar and the evolution of WAC-based projects through the Writing Across Communities initiative directly align with the shared governance of our graduate student leaders. Some of the seminar-based projects that have taken on an institutional life beyond the classroom include: the conceptualization of the UNM Writing and Language Center and the ABQ Community Writing Center (from my Fall 2007 ENGL 420/520 Tutoring Writing), the UNM Core Curriculum Task Force (from my Spring 2009 ENGL 640 WPA Seminar) and the Writing Intensive Learning Communities Pilot Project (from my Spring 2012 ENGL 640 Ideologies of Literacy). In all three cases, my students and I forged a bidirectional pedagogical relationship between the graduate classroom and the university as a catalyzing space for engaging language diversity issues at UNM.

Strategically, the graduate classroom has been a vital container for cultivating ideas and relationships. In this way, the graduate seminar represents a “think tank” or, more aptly, a kind of sourdough “starter jar” for shaping new visions into expanding projects. The catalyst for action and implementation happens beyond the classroom through the student governed WAC Alliance. To illustrate, I trace the trajectory of invention to implementation of my proposal for a “Writing Center Without Walls” in my Fall 2007 ENGL 420/520 Tutoring Writing Course. Over the course of four years, this proposal evolved from an imaginative fiction into eventual intra-institutional and extra-institutional implementation. This bidirectional approach to institutionalizing WAC continues to respond to the constraints and the opportunities of UNM’s institutional context, much like the ecotone itself bridges different environments.

A Writing Center Without Walls

Nathalie Singh-Corcoran’s insightful essay, “You’re Either a Scholar or an Administrator, Make Your Choice” delineates the paradoxical role of the junior WAC director, Writing Center director or writing program administrator who straddles the institutional divide between scholarship and service. Navigating these challenges under the guidance of a tenured faculty mentor is critical to graduate teaching assistants

who envision professional lives as not only writers and researchers, but future administrators who wish to be effective and pragmatic leaders. Ensuring access and equity for them instills this value for their future interactions.

We also try to model the ways that we can make our work sustainable, and in the academy that often takes the form of research. With support from the 2007 International Writing Centers Association research grant, my graduate students and I conducted data collection and analysis in October 2007 in my ENGL 420/520 Tutoring Writing course to identify the ethnolinguistic identities and language and literacy attitudes of our First Year Writing student population. We completed data collection in December 2007. Through an open forum report on our findings to the directors of the UNM tutoring program, the Center for Academic Programs (CAPS), institutional momentum catalyzed over time into the establishment of the UNM Writing and Language Center and the ABQ Community Writing Center. Significantly, Daniel Sanford, a UNM Linguistics doctoral candidate enrolled in my ENGL 420/520 Tutoring Writing, eventually implemented our recommendations over the next six years and established the UNM Writing Center in his capacity as a CAPS administrator (Sanford). Moreover, these findings about the language and literacy practices of our ethnolinguistically diverse student population have since informed the revision of our First Year Writing Program, inspired faculty development programs, sparked the establishment of a language and writing center, seeded the cultivation of community outreach projects such as the ABQ Community Writing Center, and shaped the development of our graduate program in Rhetoric and Composition by cultivating practice-ready junior writing program administrators trained for serving linguistically-diverse learning sites.

Applying an IRB-approved ethnographic model of inquiry combined with a random sampling survey to derive rich descriptions of our students' communities of belonging, ethnolinguistic identities, and literacy practices, we began mapping the many student identities represented in our ENGL 101 courses. Language identity and language attitude survey instruments

were distributed and data collected from 15 sections of ENGL 101 (approximately 225 first year students). The sample represents 7.5% of the first year ENGL 101 student population. We used a random sampling method with Likert scale survey instruments to identify student demographics and language and writing attitudes for this data sample.

We delivered a presentation of our findings to the Chair of the Department of English, Directors of Rhetoric and Writing Program and Directors of the Center for Academic Programs at the close of our study in an open forum at the UNM Student Union in December 2007. The eight student researchers in this study presented their findings for discussion with recommendations for pedagogy and policy changes impacting ethnolinguistically diverse college writers. Our findings about the self-reported ethnolinguistic heterogeneity of first year writing students helped us to advance the case for the establishment of Writing and Language Center. In brief, our findings revealed:

Nearly 50% of the respondents in the data sample identified themselves as Hispanic. Among this population, over 75% of Hispanic students are English monolingual; 25% are English/Spanish bilingual; majority of English/Spanish bilingual respondents identify "Spanglish" as their first language. Less than 15% of English/Spanish bilingual students report being literate in Spanish. Over 80% of respondents are first generation college students. More than 75% English monolingual and English/Spanish bilingual respondents demonstrate strong adherence to language and literacy myths. Over 85% of respondents indicate that writing is critical to their academic and professional success. Fewer than 15% of ethnolinguistically diverse students seek assistance with their college writing assignments at the University Writing Center. Fewer than 20% of first generation college students (across ethnolinguistic groups) seek guidance with their college writing assignments.

These findings suggested the need for stronger alliances between ENGL 101 courses, Department of English, and the formation of the UNM Language and Writing Center to address the interests and academic concerns of

ethnolinguistically diverse first generation college students.

Three years later, graduate students Brian Hendrickson, Erin Penner Gallegos, and Genevieve García de Mueller re-examined these findings and recommendations. Over the next eighteen months (2010–2012), they re-visioned the initial proposal for establishing the ABQ Community Writing Center derived from the 2007 ethnolinguistic diversity research project. Hendrickson, Gallegos, and García de Mueller elected to attend UNM for their graduate degrees (turning down other admission offers) largely because of the opportunities afforded them in working with the WAC Alliance and the possibility of building the foundations of a community writing center in the heart of downtown Albuquerque. All three of these graduate students learned to engage the intellectual life cycle for their Writing Across Communities projects. Over the course of their graduate program, each of them exercised authorial agency by drafting project proposals, generating outcome reports, presenting conference papers, and finally publishing single-authored journal articles (Gallegos; García de Mueller; Hendrickson “The Hard Work”). Moreover, they learned to leverage their growing national authority in WAC and writing center leadership to conduct a robust grant writing campaign to secure funding for Writing Across Communities conferences and literacy symposia at UNM. In April 2011, with the support of the WAC Alliance, these three visionary graduate students hosted Tiffany Rousculp, founder of the Salt Lake Community Writing Center, for the UNM Working With Writers Symposium.

Within weeks following the April 2011 Working With Writers Symposium, the ABQ Community Writing opened up shop in the modest setting of the Albuquerque downtown public library, trained in current writing center pedagogies taught through my ENGL 420/520 Tutoring Writing course (About Writing Across Communities). The ABQ Community Writing Center represented an important outreach program of the UNM Writing Across Communities Initiative and the WAC Alliance, serving as a laboratory for literacy education and campus-community partnership development for

both graduate and undergraduate students at UNM. As part of our ongoing partnership with the Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Libraries, the ABQ Community Writing Center in the Main Library in downtown Albuquerque opened on a weekly drop-in basis for local citizens supported and administered by our graduate students.¹ By April 2014, the ABQ Community Writing Center began forging alliances with the Albuquerque Offcenter Community Arts Project aligning missions in service to underserved citizens and homeless community members.

Intellectual authority, time, vision, and commitment among our graduate students have generated decisive and enduring grassroots support for Writing Across Communities. In the twelve years since we launched Writing Across Communities, our graduate students find themselves managing a constellation of WAC projects reflective of a small non-profit organization. Consistent with the recommendations of the “Statement of Graduate Student Writing Center Administration” delineated by Julie Eckerle, Karen Rowan, and Shevaun Watson, graduate students set the terms of their service under the guidance a tenured faculty mentor. They define the job descriptions they wish to develop within the WAC Alliance and the ABQ Community Writing Center, using their experiences to inform their research and scholarship. The organization structure of the WAC Alliance is governed by a Head Council (as envisioned by the graduate students themselves) rather than a top-down faculty-dominant hierarchy. The faculty advisor serves as a mentor, guide, and resource, not a supervisor per se. Faculty have no voting rights in the WAC Alliance as delineated in their charter to protect the sovereignty of this student organization (Cryer).

As Melissa Nicolas argues in *(E)Merging Identities: Authority, Identity, and the Place(s) In-Between*, “Graduate students, in many ways, are betwixt and between: they are not faculty, yet they may share some of the same duties as faculty; they are not fully credentialed in the field, yet they may be called on to use their knowledge to run, or at least assist with running, a writing program or a writing center” (1). The structures of the Writing Across Communities initiative, the WAC Alliance, and

ABQ Community Writing Center assure that the graduate students directing these project are not called upon but rather call upon themselves to engage this work and, in turn, rely on their faculty mentors to support them in their vision. At the center of this structure are notions of citizenship, social justice, and community activism. These new leaders recognize that it is not enough to study literacy education, academic access, and ethnolinguistic diversity; they need and want to serve the constituencies they teach and study. They don't want to wait until after defending their theses and dissertations to begin doing useful work. They arrive with the desire and commitment. In turn, I believe, the graduate classroom provides the intellectual space and tools to enact new visions—enhanced by the wisdom of our field and guided by the experiences and discoveries of those who came before us.

WAC and graduate education programs, in turn, need to promote approaches to knowledge making, strategies for community activism, and opportunities for writers at the intersections of Composition Studies, including second language writing and community literacy education. Our graduate students say it best. Brian Hendrickson, UNM graduate student and WAC event coordinator, reflects on in his editor's column for the UNM WAC newsletter, *Writing Communities*:

Indeed, it is my hope that many of our initiatives, including the Albuquerque Community Writing Center, Celebration of Student Writing, and Write On! Workshops, eventually find institutional homes at UNM, thereby ensuring they receive the continued financial and administrative support they deserve. Nevertheless, it will remain the responsibility of each new cadre of student leaders to ensure that the true spirit of Writing Across Communities lives on in these and other grassroots initiatives still to come. (3)

Writing Across Communities represents a paradigm shift in progress. Our institutional writing programs need to move toward a shift-in-progress because our students need literacy models capacious enough for 21st-century global citizenship. Navigating the ecotones of difference

across social and cultural contexts, rich and dynamic transitional zones, provides new opportunities for growth and learning in spaces with very few maps and field guides ("Ecotones").

Among other valuable outcomes, my ten years of serving as program chair for Writing Across Communities confirms this singular realization. The experience of enacting pedagogies and leading projects that promote transcultural citizenship during graduate education teaches future WPAs, WAC directors, and Writing Center administrators a broad range of strategies that can help to enhance equity and access across the curriculum through the critical educational conduits of language and literacy. Promoting access and cultivating educational conditions where diversity (linguistic, cultural, ideological, and discursive difference) can thrive demands creating safe spaces for experimentation and offering protection from intellectual colonization. Recognizing the authorial potential as well as vulnerability within novice writers is as critical for designing efficacious writing opportunities in graduate education as it is for undergraduate education. Ultimately, effective graduate writing education informs effective undergraduate writing education. If we model equity and access practices in our teaching to our graduate students, they will model these practices in their teaching to their own undergraduate students.

Genevieve García de Mueller, former UNM graduate student and new assistant professor at the University of Texas of Rio Grande Valley, observes this as she reflects on learning to help undergraduate students access their own agency as writers in community settings. By designing her own pedagogical applications of Writing Across Communities principles during graduate school, Genevieve discovered ways of having her students:

think about what they value about writing; about the kinds of past experiences they bring to their writing that makes them value certain things in a particular way. We also want student to reflect consistently about why they're thinking the way they're thinking in terms of writing, in terms of composition. We also think that may help them learn to transfer those skills to other

areas of their lives. (Quoted in Guerra 162)

As our graduate students continue to join the national conversation on citizenship and engagement across the curriculum in the capacity of new assistant professors across the country, there is no better endorsement of Writing Across Communities approaches to graduate education than Marty Townsend's glowing accolades during her visit to UNM for the 2013 Writing the World Symposium (Legacy). Recalling her dissertation research that involved conducting a case study of UNM's Ford Foundation-funded WAC initiative launched in 1991 (which ultimately failed more than ten years before the implementation of Writing Across Communities in 2004), Townsend applauded the success of the new iteration of WAC through Writing Across Communities. She called graduate student Genevieve Garcia de Mueller and her fellow junior WPA peers "the most promising diaspora of WAC leaders in the nation" (Townsend).

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Notes

1. For further information on the ABQ Community Writing Center as developed and administered in 2010 by UNM graduate students Erin Penner Gallegos, Genevieve García de Mueller, Brian Hendrickson, and Deb Paczynski, please, see: <http://abqwcw.wordpress.com/>

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